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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the hypotheses that: (1) people from different language backgrounds would differ in the jokes they found funny; and (2) the differences would be related to culture rather than lack of vocabulary. A questionnaire with 30 jokes was presented to 51 English teachers from a wide variety of countries and 11 native English-speakers. Respondents were asked to rank jokes on a five-point scale. Each respondent was also asked to record a joke from his own culture, in English. Analysis of the responses suggests that the essence of a joke seems to depend on a statement calling forth one schema with the punch line forcing another, unexpected and often bizarre schema in its place. The schemata that individuals have available are a function of the culture or subculture to which they belong. Non-native speakers of a given language share only part of the language culture with native speakers. The questionnaire used is appended. (MSE)

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L. Dickinson

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HUMOUR ACROSS CULTURES

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper prepared for the International Congress of
Applied Linguists 1990

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The topic of humour, and especially its linguistic analysis, does not yet feature in applied linguistics. I think that this is odd because the joke would seem a natural testbed for some theories of discourse. In addition, though there is a large literature on humour, there is very little informed input from linguists or applied linguists, and - with a few exceptions - the level of linguistic analysis is pathetic.

The term "humour" covers a wide field, including the visual-cartoons, the actual, - clowns, slap-stick, banana skins, and the verbal. I am concerned only with verbal humour, and with only a small part of that. We might divide verbal humour into two parts, "spontaneous" humour, and the "canned" joke. Spontaneous humour is that arising out of a particular situation; such humour might be intentional - as when someone cracks a joke, or makes a deliberate pun; or unintentional - as when someone accidentally produces a pun. The other category of verbal humour is the one I am concerned with; this category is the one of the deliberate joke - sometimes called the "canned joke". An example of a canned joke is one told to me by a teacher from Somalia:

A boy asks his father, "Why is it that your beard is still black when your hair has turned white?" "Fool!", says the man, "My beard is twenty years younger than my hair."

I started out with the broad hypothesis that people from different language cultures would differ in the jokes which they found funny. I further hypothesise that the differences are related to differences in culture, rather than, for example, merely lack of vocabulary. In order to test these hypotheses I gave a questionnaire consisting of thirty canned jokes in random order to 51 English language teachers from a wide variety of countries, and 11 mother tongue English speakers. Respondents were asked to rank each joke on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 representing a judgement of "very funny". They were also asked to say what their mother tongue was, their country of origin, and the language through which they were educated. They were also requested to write down a good joke from their own culture - though in translation. The data was collected in four categories, the group with English as a mother tongue, and three groups of respondents with non-English mother tongue. These were grouped according to the language medium of their education - English (10), French (20), and the respondent's mother tongue (21)

Testing the hypothesis that differences in judgments of "funniness" are related to differences in cultural background requires an instrument for the analysis which gives a

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specification of that part of culture related to language; and it requires a way of identifying those cultural elements in the jokes which I want to analyse. Recent studies in discourse which are concerned with the context - or knowledge base - necessary to interpret stretches of written or spoken language provide the basis for such an instrument. Thus, theories of comprehension using such concepts as scripts, scenarios or schemata provide a way of identifying and evaluating cultural elements necessary to interpret a joke.

However, the methodology I have used to sample subjects' reaction to jokes is not nearly sophisticated enough to produce evidence either for or against the hypothesis that different reactions are due to different cultures. There are many variables that I have not controlled which effect the interpretation of results. Thus, although all the subjects are English language teachers - and therefore can be assumed to have a minimum level of language competence, I did not attempt to measure the language competence of the subjects, so I cannot say to what degree the rating for a particular joke reflects lack of understanding of elements in the language necessary to understand it.

I did not control for familiarity with the joke - whether the respondent had heard the joke before, nor for the judgement that the joke was "corny", which in any case, I was unable to define. I asked respondents to note these factors for each joke, but this information was not taken into account in the analysis. Nor did I control for individual "sense of humour"; I quickly discovered that I didn't understand what the components are in sense of humour - other than the obvious result that people of the same broad cultural background differ as to what jokes they find funny. However, along the way I have come to a clearer understanding of what makes canned jokes funny, and I have some evidence to support some rather obvious cultural universals.

It is not, of course, possible to explain why or why not something is funny merely from linguistic and discourse analysis; this requires a theory from psychology. Linguistics can provide part of the data for such a theory - in particular linguistics can describe the similarities found in humorous texts, but this does not account for their humour. The most I can do here, then, is to suggest a means of analysis which identifies the key discourse characteristics of "joke" texts.

There is very little published work on the linguistic analysis of jokes. Most of the literature I have found is, first, very naive in its application of linguistics, and second, manages to be quite unhelpful in explaining why a particular text is regarded as humorous. Pepicello and Weisberg (1983) for instance, produce 14 categories of "linguistic strategies in verbal humour" consisting of such things as Phonological, Morphological, Pre-supposition and Parody.

The problem is, of course, that this categorisation is non-explanatory. Look at this joke, for example:

Sign on the door of a nudist Club in October "clothed for the season"

This is categorised as minimal pair, referring to the pair "clothed" and "closed". But this does not help in deciding what makes that text humorous. I can think of many minimal pairs that are not humorous at all. Pepicello and Weisberg breach a useful principle stated by Raskin (1987) that in the application of a source field (linguistics) to a target field (humour) the problem should come from the latter - humour - while the concepts and methods should be borrowed from the former. Second, the solution of a problem from the target field should involve something the source field can actually do. The formulation of the problem here comes from linguistics: how can we apply linguistics to humour? rather than formulating the problem from within humour - What makes this text humorous?

The most satisfactory account of jokes which I have come across derives from Raskin (1985), and the account I give here is a modification of his. Raskin's theory is concerned with discourse, and is based on Schank and Ableson's (1977) notion of script. The modifications I have made include using the term schema in place of script. Schemata are defined by Brown and Yule (1983:247) - following several other authors - as "higher level complex knowledge structures which function as ideational scaffolding in the organisation and interpretation of experience." Thus, "schemata can be seen as the organised background knowledge which lead us to expect or predict aspects (of that knowledge) in our interpretation of discourse." (248) The essence of a joke seems to depend on a statement calling forth one schema with the punch-line forcing another, unexpected, and often bizarre, schema in its place. A good example is this

"Doctor, come at once; our baby has swallowed a fountain pen!"
 "I'll be right over; what are you doing in the meantime?"
 "Using a pencil!"

Up to the point of the doctor's question - "...What are you doing in the meantime", the schema called forth is of a crisis in which the total concern of the parents is assumed to be for the baby in danger. The response "using a pencil" calls forth a new, bizarre schema in which the wellbeing of the baby is subjugated to the importance of continuing writing. (It's interesting that making the surprise schema explicit kills the joke.) A good joke depends on its ability to call forth an unlikely schema very economically. A joke text, then, requires the possibility of calling forth at least two schemata which are in opposition. One of these schemata is favoured in the listeners' or readers' comprehension, while the other may not even be perceived without some kind of pointing. Consequently, the joke text often contains a "trigger" which reveals to the listener/reader the obscure schema. In the "baby" example, the trigger is "using a pencil" which switches the schema from "Baby is in danger: do something quickly" to the bizarre "Baby has swallowed my pen. I have to use a substitute"

Let's take a Woody Allen joke as another example

"Did you hear about the girl who ran off to Venice? She became a street walker, and drowned"

The requirement for two opposing schemata is provided by the ambiguity of "street-walker", - a prostitute, and a literal interpretation - one who walks streets. "Drowned" triggers the interpretation from the obvious "she is a prostitute", to the unlikely - "she walks on the streets", which intersects with a schema called forth by "Venice" - "streets in Venice are replaced by canals" and so the joke.

The schemata which individuals have available (or in some cases, maybe, which they choose to call forth) will be a function of the culture - including sub-culture- to which the individual belongs. Individuals who speak English as a foreign language will share part of the language culture with mother tongue speakers of English - but only part of it. Language culture can be perceived as the schemata available to the individual for the interpretation of any proposition. A necessary condition for calling forth schemata is, presumably, the recognition of the lexis, and knowledge of the grammatical relations in the proposition. However, assuming this, speakers will differ as to what schemata they have available (or, maybe, choose to use, or approve of etc.) for particular propositions. Thus, "street-walker" must call forth the schema "prostitute" rather than be analysed into its component parts; and the schemata called forth by Venice must include the information that streets are replaced by canals.

: Raskin (1984, 1987) formalises these requirements into four
: hypotheses. (again, I have substituted schemata for Raskin's
: script.)

- : 1. The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different
: schemata.
- : 2. The two schemata with which the text is compatible are
: opposite.
- : 3. The text is a non-bona-fide communication. Thus a joke text
: obeys a different Gricean Co-operative principle from bona fide
: communication. The co-operative principle for non-bona-fide
: communication is based on a different set of maxims.
- : 4. There is a trigger which switches from one schema to another.

RESULTS

Because of the small numbers I combined all "foreign" responses and compared them to the responses from English mother tongue speakers, and then looked at the comparative responses for "best" jokes and "worst" jokes. The "English" group - who were actually mostly Scots- were rather mean in their praise; three jokes got gradings of 4 /5 from about half of the group. [OHP.1] These were numbers 8,17 and 20.

8: Chronic depressive sends postcard to his psychiatrist: Having a wonderful holiday. Why?

17: A man - leading a crocodile on a rope - walked into a pub in Belfast. He said to the Barman "Do you serve Englishmen in here?" "Sure", said the Barman, "This place is non-religious, non-political and non-racists. We serve everyone." "Great," said the man, "Give me a pint of Guinness for myself and an Englishman for the crocodile!"

20: President Reagan is asked about his opinion on foreign affairs. He replies, "Personally, I don't like foreign affairs. I feel that if you have an affair, you should have it right here in the United States."

Of these, 17 - the crocodile joke, and 20 - President Reagan, got high ratings from the Foreign group, but less than a quarter of this group found 8 particularly funny.

[OHP.2] By contrast, 6 jokes - numbers 3,10,12,17,20 and 23 - were rated highly by over 60% of the foreign group. 3 - the baby joke discussed earlier - was rated as good by about 70% of the foreign respondents and none of the English.

10: Emperor Franz Joseph notices a man in his service who resembles himself strikingly. "Was you mother in service at the Palace at some time?" the emperor asks. "No sire," the man answered, "but my father was".

This was rated good by 75% of the foreign respondents but only 25% of the English. 12, a joke about a parrot which costs twice the price of all the others in the shop because the others call it "the headmaster", was liked by about 70% of the foreign but less than 20% of the English respondents.

23: "Waiter, What's this?" "It's bean soup, Ma'am." "I'm not interested in what it's been, what is it now?"

65% of the foreigners though that this was good, but only one person - 10% - of the English thought it funny. 17 - the crocodile - was popular with both groups; 80% of the foreign group found this good, and over 40% of the English. 20 - President Reagan - was also liked by both groups. Just over 60% of the foreign group thought that this was a good joke, and about 48% of the English thought it good.

DISCUSSION

Of the six jokes that get a high rating in the foreign group, one, bean soup, seems to be a simple pun; one, President Reagan, has a linguistic trigger but seems to rely for humour on ridicule of a person in high office. This and the other four might, very tentatively, be analysed in terms of cultural allusions of some universality. So we have number 3 - the baby - concern versus no concern for the well being of a baby; number 10 - Franz Joseph -

concerned with paternity and sexual power; 12 - the parrot-concerned with status and worth in the teaching profession (remember that all the respondents were teachers) and number 17- the crocodile- concerned with racial hatred.

Let me conclude with the worst joke in the whole collection, which I got from Nash (1985) who described it as a paragon of subtle humour. None of my respondents found it funny!

18: Living in Coventry is like watching a plank warp.

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QUESTIONNAIRE ON JOKES

COURSE: _____ YEAR: 1990/91

I AM FROM (COUNTRY) _____

MY MOTHER TONGUE IS _____

MY EDUCATION WAS IN THE MEDIUM OF _____

I am conducting a small research survey into the understanding of British humour by people from other cultures and language background. I would be very grateful for your help. The task is not onerous; I just want you to read some jokes and judge them for how funny they seem to you.

- please mark one of the numbers : 5 means very funny
1 means not funny at all.
- please comment after a joke if you have anything to say.
For example, it was corny. or I didn't understand it. or it was an old joke.
- Finally, can you tell me a good joke from your culture-
in translation please! Write it at the end of this paper.

1. Definition of a lecture: "A means of transferring information from the notes of the lecturer to the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either."

5 4 3 2 1

2. A man and a woman were walking along a muddy track one day when suddenly they heard a squeaky little voice crying. "Help me! Please help me." They stopped, and looked around and eventually realised that the voice was coming from a frog on the side of the track. "Help me, please!" said the frog again. "What's wrong?" asked the man. "I'm not really a frog," said the frog, "I'm really an English teacher. I was turned into a frog by a wicked witch who wants to stop people in this country learning English." "Oh, you poor thing! But how can we help?" asked the woman. "I must be kissed on the lips by a woman" the frog replied. The man bent down and picked up the frog and thrust it into the pocket of his jacket. He closed the zip. "Why did you do that?" asked the woman. "I was just going to kiss it!" "I know," said the man. "But a talking frog is worth a lot more than an English teacher!"

5 4 3 2 1

3. "Doctor, come at once. Our baby has swallowed a fountain pen!" "I'll be right over. What are you doing in the meantime?" "Using a pencil"

5 4 3 2 1

4. Nurse: "That's a pretty bad cold you have. What are you taking for it?"

Patient: "Make me an offer."

5 4 3 2 1

5. A knife that slices through four loaves of bread at once could be called a four loaf cleaver.

5 4 3 2 1

6. All this drinking will be the urination of me.

5 4 3 2 1

7. Be alert - England needs lerts.

5 4 3 2 1

8. Chronic depressive sends postcard to his psychiatrist; Having a wonderful holiday. Why?

5 4 3 2 1

9. Did you hear about the girl who ran off to Venice? She became a street walker -- and drowned.

5 4 3 2 1

10. Emperor Franz Joseph notices a man who resembles himself strikingly. "Was your mother in service at the palace, at some time?" The Emperor asks. "No Sire", the man answered, "But my father was".

5 4 3 2 1

11. Groucho Marx once wrote to the secretary of a club to which he belonged "Please accept my resignation. I don't want to belong to a club that will accept me as a member."

5 4 3 2 1

12. A man went into a pet shop to buy a parrot to give to a friend as a gift. He saw one that he liked the look of and asked the shop keeper the price. "Five hundred pounds," said the shop keeper. "My goodness," said the man, "I didn't know parrots were so expensive. What can it say?" "Oh this one can't speak," said the shop keeper "but it's very good at quadratic equations. If you want one that speaks, what about this one. It speaks three languages." "Really!" said the customer, "But how much does it cost?" "Ah, that one costs one thousand pounds" "Gosh!" said the customer, "They're getting more expensive." He looked round the shop and saw a rather elderly, untidy parrot sitting on its perch and muttering to itself. It looked suitably cheap. "What about this one?" he asked, "how much is it?" "Two thousand pounds." said the shop keeper. "Two thousand pounds!" said the customer. "What does it do?" "Nothing," said the shop keeper, "but the other two call it the headmaster."

5 4 3 2 1

13. How do you know if there's an elephant in the fridge? You get footprints in the butter.

5 4 3 2 1

14. I can marry anyone I please. I just haven't found anyone I please yet.

5 4 3 2 1

15. I couldn't care less about apathy.

5 4 3 2 1

16. I must say you're looking couth kempt and sheveled today.

5 4 3 2 1

17. A man - leading a crocodile on a rope - walked into a pub in Belfast. He said to the barman, "Do you serve Englishmen in here?" "Sure," said the barman, "This place is non-religious, non-political and non-racist. We serve everyone." "Great," said the man, "Give me a pint of Guinness for myself and an Englishman for the crocodile!"

5 4 3 2 1

18. Living in Coventry is like watching a plank warp.

5 4 3 2 1

19. Magellan, the great explorer, circumcised the earth.

5 4 3 2 1

20. President Reagan is asked about his opinion on Foreign affairs. He replies "Personally, I don't like foreign affairs. I feel that if you have an affair, you should have it right here, in America".

5 4 3 2 1

21. Sign on the gate of a Nudist club "Clothed for the season."

5 4 3 2 1

22. The first evening after moving into his new house, Bob went down to the local pub and fell into conversation with the barman, a man full of local knowledge and a useful source of information on interesting places and strange events. Presently, their talk was interrupted by the arrival of a dapper little man, evidently a regular, who greeted the barman, ordered a large glass of sherry, drank it, said goodnight, walked up the wall, across the ceiling, down the opposite wall, and out the door. "That was strange", said the Barman. "Wow, did you say strange!" said Bob. "Yes", said the barman, "he usually drinks whisky"

5 4 3 2 1

23. Waiter! What's this?

It's bean soup, Ma'am.

I'm not interested in what it's been! What is it now?

5 4 3 2 1

24. An octopus is a sea creature with eight testicles.

5 4 3 2 1

25. What animals can jump higher than a house? All animals. Houses can't jump.

5 4 3 2 1

26. What do you call a man who marries another man?
A Minister.

5 4 3 2 1

27. What has four wheels and flies? A garbage truck.

5 4 3 2 1

28. What is a myth? A female moth.

5 4 3 2 1

29. What kind of ears does a train have? Engineers.

5 4 3 2 1

30. What's the difference between a baby and a coat? One you
were, one you wear.

5 4 3 2 1

END

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